DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 243 155 CS 504 568

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TITLE Nothin' Says Lovin' Like Something from a Commercial: A Critical Look at Interpersonal Communication in Commercials.
PUB DATE Feb 84
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Speech Communication Association (Seattle, WA, February 18-21, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Affection; Content Analysis; Family Relationship; *Interpersonal Relationship; Mass Media; *Mass Media Effects; Merchandising; *Social Behavior; Social Life; *Social Values; *Television Commercials; Television Viewing
IDENTIFIERS *Media Role

ABSTRACT

Television commercials that deal with interpersonal communication fall into two types--those whose interpersonal dynamics convey the message and those in which the interaction expressed is part of the background setting. Among the former are scenarios by American Telephone and Telegraph whose emphasis is on building and maintaining relationships, not conveying information. Among the latter are commercials by Taco Bell or Duncan Hines that show people eating together, showing clearly that caring individuals share meals. They also have fun together, primarily physically active (and camera visible) fun involving warm hugs and lots of unrestrained laughter, while consuming beer, soda, or wine. Still another repeated scene is of people offering advice. As purveyors of appropriate behavior, these advertisements support the assertion that commercials have taken on moral authority as well as authority over style. What commercials offer are recurring demonstrations of how human beings in caring relationships treat each other. All the characters are civil, considerate, giving, and capable of at least minimal financial provision. They treasure understanding, affection, and pleasure. The commercial's language implies that behavior other than that prescribed is not an acceptable alternative. In fact, it is unsettling to realize how much an expression of caring may be influenced by commercials. (HOD)

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NOTHIN' SAYS LOVIN' LIKE SOMETHING FROM A COMMERCIAL: A CRITICAL LOOK AT INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN COMMERCIALS

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NOTHIN' SAYS LOVIN' LIKE SOMETHING FROM A COMMERCIAL:

A CRITICAL LOOK AT INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN COMMERCIALS

Communication scholars have long acknowledged that television commercials sell a lot more than soap and soft drinks. Additives ascribed to the 30-second spots range from sensuality to sex-role stereotyping to guilt. Commercials are, after all, part of the television environment, and as such contribute to what Morris Janowitz in his book The Last Half Century (1978) calls the "flow of materials which fashion normative standards and which implant a picture of social reality" (p. 338).

Janowitz' view of the role of mass media was confirmed by an extensive literature review conducted by Robert Hawkins and Suzanne Pingree (1981). They wrote:

> Evidence from experiments, longitudinal analyses, and a variety of indirect analyses all support the interpretation that viewing television contributes to social reality beliefs (p. 350).

Examinations of what those beliefs are has ranged widely; Hawkins and Pingree found:

> Most studies show evidence for a link between amount of viewing and beliefs, regardless of the kind of social reality studied. These studies cover a diverse range of areas including prevalence of violence, family structures, interpersonal mistrust, fear of victimization, traditional sex roles, family values, images of older people, attitudes about doctors and concern about racial problems (p. 349).

Measuring the reality-constructing impact of commercials, as discrete from other programming, is an unlikely task; but discussing the impact from a critical perspective is not so difficult. Certainly some authors have already begun the process. Ronald Berman, in his book Advertising and Social Change (1981), points out, "Commercials delineate a social world. Within that world, social values are upheld more firmly than in our own world" (p. 103).

Berman credits commercials with providing insights into that social world: "Advertisements that used to sell satisfaction or pleasure are now selling something that mass society seems not to have: normal human relationships or the idea of them" (p. 127). He cites Janowitz' observation that "the first two modern themes of advertising, production and consumption," are "being joined by a third: the management of interpersonal relations" (Berman, p.114).

Berman sees part of the shift in emphasis as generated by a decline in traditional sources of such information. "We have," he contends, "gone from church to school to television in the last half-century in the search for authoritative guidance in the 'small morals' of everyday life" (p. 102).

No one can claim conclusively that any given audience has learned loving behavior from Ma Bell rather than from the genuine article. But at the same time, no one can quite deny it. It seems worthwhile, therefore, to take a critical look at commercials from the viewpoint of interpersonal communication, to determine exactly what behaviors are being presented as appropriate guidance in the "small morals."

Commercials which deal with interpersonal communication seem to

fall into two types--those whose message turns on the interpersonal dynamics expressed and those in which the interaction expressed is part of the background setting.

Stars among the former are the tear-jerking scenarios brought to us by American Telephone and Telegraph. So well known that it spawned a parody by rival network SPRINT is the scene which shows a black middle-aged couple at the kitchen table. "Joey called this morning," says the woman. "So how's J--" begins the man, then breaks off and responds with quickening pace. "Joey! What's wrong?" "Nothing," the woman quivers. "Nothing? Our Joey called 2000 miles. The kids all right?" "Fine." "Sally?" "Fine." "Kids all right, Sally's fine--so why did he call?" "I asked him that too," the woman replies, tears welling in her eyes. "But why are you crying?" asks the man with a tender softness that sets up the woman to deliver the punch line. "Because Joey said, I called just because I love you, Mom." In case the role model isn't enough for viewers to make the transfer to their own lives, A.T.&T. gives it to them straight: "Reach out, reach out and touch someone."

Similar emotional scenes from A.T.&T. depict a young man coming to realize his father longs to feel needed by him, and calling his dad to talk, a father who quarrels with his son on the way out of the house to catch a plane and at his destination calls home to apologize, old friends calling to reminisce, etc. All of them have to do with the vital importance of communication, as might be expected from a telephone company, but their emphasis is on building and maintaining relationships, not conveying information.

These commercials have one thing in common: they tell viewers how to say "I love you." A.T.&T. does not bear this responsibility alone. Products running the gamut from toothpaste to auto mufflers present similar themes. Pillsbury has traded in "Nothin' says lovin' like somethin' from the oven" for "Bake someone happy," but the thrust remains the same: cherished family closeness goes with homebaked (but not from scratch) goodies. Nutri-Grain gives us a mother concerned about sugar in her child's cereal; behind her verbal message rise the music-box strains of "This Is Dedicated to the One I Love." Johnson's Band-aids presents love as minor medical care and lots of hugging. To Sears, it is family photos, saving those "precious moments." To Greyhound it is a visit home. For Prudential, of course, it is providing for loved ones after death, and the characters taken abruptly from life by classically attired angels are prone to cry out, "But I've got a family!"

That Midas would try to sell auto mufflers through human relations indicates how widespread this trend has become. An actor who clearly represents the Average Man addresses the audience. "I have one daughter in college and one about to be married," he tells us. "I have better things to spend money on than car repairs." Midas, he reports, will take care of his car economically. And then he adds responsibly that someday he will spend money on himself, but now "some things are more important." Parents, the Midas parable demonstrates, sacrifice their own desires to give to their children; this is how to communicate love.

Selling through human relations is nothing new to Hallmark,

whose product, after all, is based almost entirely on communicating interpersonally. A recent Hallmark ad shows an office scene, with women sending around a birthday card for all to sign. The voice-over urges the viewer to "give a little of yourself." That "self" is equated with Hallmark cards is only one implication; another is that caring is communicated through giving. Jonathan Price, in his book The Best Thing on TV (1978), cites an example of a Hallmark commercial which still runs occasionally. He calls it "one commercial that made thousands of hardened ad people cry in award ceremonies around the world" (p.45). It is the story of Grandma moving from the family home. She sits in the attic with her grandson, looking through her collection of Hallmark cards and remembering the occasions she received them. Mom tells her the movers have arrived, and Grandma packs up her memories and takes them away forever. We are given two messages. Sending Hallmark cards is the obvious one. The other has to do with how to comfort aging parents when they must leave the homeplace.

McDonald's has a very contemporary message. It shows a black woman in a bus driver's uniform worrying about her family's dinner. When she gets home, the kids have a surprise--they're taking her to McDonald's. The absence of a father implies that this is a single-parent family, and the woman is both the bread-winner and the bread-maker. "Did you have a hard day, Mom?" one of the girls asks. Mom hugs her. "It just got easier," she smiles. Even children whose budget must be stretched to afford Big Macs can figure out how to tell Mom they care.

Some of the most complex human relations scenes are brought to us by Crest, whose focus is more cavities in lifestyle than in molars. In one scene a pigtailed girl reports irritably to her father that she can't find her sweater and that nothing is right any more since "Momie started working." In about ten seconds, the scene has set up several issues--stresses related to a two-career (or two-job) household, children's feelings of neglect, frustrations related to changes in expectations, and men as nurturers. Dad explains that Mom still cares about the family, and as proof presents Crest. While this is at one level ludicrous, it works because of the interpersonal models the ad draws on--that caring equals taking care and providing for. Because Mom wants the best for her daughter's teeth, and takes the time to work for that goal (in this case by buying Crest), she shows her love. But Crest does not stop at that simple level. Dad shows the girl her sweater on the back of the bathroom door and she acknowledges that "maybe it's time" she took a little responsibility for herself.

Crest currently has a number of these Dad-as-caretaker ads in which the father patiently responds to his child's emotional needs and recognizes relational as well as content messages. Dad understands sibling rivalry and offers the younger child a chance to win with Crest; he tells a pre-schooler whose concern is "Momie's mad 'cause I didn't brust my teeth yet" that "Momie only wants what's good for you"; he helps his son with math and tells him, as the boy brushes and confides his worries about school, "Quit worrying; you always make Mom and me real proud of you."

In contrast to the ads whose messages are dependent on

scenes of interpersonal communication, a second set of ads shows interpersonal communication occurring in background scenes, but not as dominant parts of the message. One set of scenes shows people eating together. Whether they do this to promote Taco Bell, Long John Silver's, Brim, Miracle Whip, Wesson Oil, Post Raisin Bran, Corn Chex, Duncan Hines, or Kraft mayonaise is incidental. What is patently clear is that caring individuals share meals.

They also have fun together, primarily physically active (and camera visible) fun involving warm hugs and lots of unrestrained laughter while consuming Coors, Diet Coke, Old Milwaukee, Carefree gum, Colt 44 Malt Liquor, Pepsi-Free, Sprite, Diet-7-Up, Riunite on ice, and Coke or wearing various brands of suntan oil.

Still another repeated scene is of people offering advice. Various caring individuals provide their close relations—and sometimes even strangers--with thoughtful suggestions about Anacin, Panadol, Wisk, Sanka, Brim, Sizzlean, Aqua-Fresh, Colgate, Puppy Chow, Biz, and Tide. In some of these instances, they go beyond advice—they actively oversee the other's consumption of the items, especially in the case of parents and children.

Finally, even when people are alone, they long for others, and desire to be attractive to them, to which end they consider Avon, Covergirl, Crystal Light, Phisoderm, Pert, Arrid, Close-up, Dentyne, Certs, and Big Red. Most of these messages are very overt. Big Red's jingle has as lyrics: "Kiss a little longer, stay close a little longer." Close-up shows two lovers naming traits in the other they adore; the sponsor urges, "Don't you owe it to each other" to use

Close-up. Puppy Chow indicates strongly that if you really care you will not feed your puppy adult dog food. Even Fancy Feast is very straightforward with its please-love-me message. Your cat will not give you the "cold shoulder" if you have the decency to feed it Fancy Feast. The message is clear: you will neither be loved, nor will you be showing love, if you choose the wrong product.

As purveyors of appropriate behavior, these mini-parables support Berman's assertion that "advertisement--especially in the form of television commercials--has by now taken on moral authority as well as authority over style" (p. 111). What commercials offer are recurring demonstrations of how human beings in caring relationships treat each other. All the characters are civil, considerate, giving, capable of at least minimal financial provision, and treasure companionship. Their interpersonal efforts are rewarded with appreciation, understanding, affection, and pleasure.

But because these are not, in fact, Sunday school lessons, inherent in each scenario are certain elements intrinsic to the commercial form.

To begin with, every plotline turns on a product. This is the nature of advertisement. Yet because the products are so intermixed with the lives of the characters we watch, they seem essential to the communication of caring.

Secondly, all commercial scenes end happily. Ever those which motivate by guilt and fear show us that with their product we can overcome. This stems from the desire of sponsors to align their product with positive emotional connotations, but it leads to the

conclusion that communicating interpersonally is a relatively simple process.

Thirdly, people have other people to talk to in commercials. They need them to further the plot and thus the product, of course, but their constant availability belies such pressing relational problems as isolation and loneliness.

These three conditions become an inherent part of the interpersonal message being sent via commercials. We are taught that we can say "I love you" with products, that when we do we will be happy, and that being with people is the only acceptable state. This message is likely to be impactful if for no other reason than the way it reaches its audience.

Commercials are repeated frequently, sometimes for years. They function almost like myths, known to all and accepted with little thought. Aired at regular but not specifically predictable intervals, they gradually insinuate themselves into the vocabulary of those who watch. Typical of measures of pervasiveness are the findings of Lyle and Hoffman (1972) who interviewed women in Los Angeles. The majority reported that their children could sing TV jingles by age two; 90% were singing them by age three.

These widely dissiminated half-minutes provide us with role models as real as the people next door. There is no doubt these have impact. As Siegel (1975) points out, "The most convincing research we have about TV's effects is the research showing that televised persons provide an example or a model for the viewer's behavior" (Siegel, p. 23).

The only real question is the extent of the impact on the individual viewer. Faber, Brown and McLeod (1979) suggest, "Differences in perspective or issue salience brought with the viewer to the specific content will affect what that viewer takes away from his or her exposure" (p. 600). Hawkins and Pingree explain:

> Even if television influences the construction of social reality, it does not do so in a vacuum. Viewers have their own experience, other mass media, friends, family, and their beliefs as filters for television's images (p. 355).

Yet the filters weaken when friends and family see the same mass media, and when other mass media proffer a fairly similar message. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1982) contend:

> Persuasive messages presented via the mass media may provide the appearance of consensus regarding orientation and action with respect to a given object or goal of persuasion. That is, such messages can present definitions to audiences in such a way that listeners are led to believe that these are the socially sanctioned modes of orientation their groups hold toward given objects or situations (p.226).

The ads reenforce this absolutist orientation. Their language implies that behavior other than that prescribed is not an acceptable alternative, but rather conveys a different meaning. "When you care enough to send the very best" not only sells Hallmark cards; it also makes very clear what it means when you get a Valentine obviously purchased from the supermarket.

Therein lies the problem. What if the dual-career Mom forgot to get toothpaste this week? What if Joey doesn't call? What if Dad snaps at his son who's worried about grades, "Why don't you study harder!" The commercials are setting unrealistic levels of competence and even-temper that a tired spouse/parent will be hard pressed to

live up to. And failure to comply has a meaning all its own.

As well commercials tie caring to material goods. There is no substantial evidence to indicate that a man who gives his wife a Hallmark card really cares more than one who gives his wife an autumn leaf or a wink, but the possibility exists that the wife may so interpret the items if she accepts the social reality presented on TV.

Most of all, commercials create the illusion that interpersonal communication of love is easy. If you are unloved, switch to Close-Up. If you have moved far from your parents, it's enough to call home. If the kids feel ignored, show them the toothpaste. Few eleven-year-old children are deeply moved by their parents paying the electric bill or buying the groceries; fewer still are likely to interpret these very caring acts as direct statements of love. No brand of toothpaste can soothe the anguish of an unwanted lover or bring companionship to an elderly person.

Despite these problems, however, the models of loving communication presented in commercials are not totally devoid of value. They indicate over and over that people are important and that what these people feel is important. They are even beginning to provide the male with some models of nurturing. Talking and communication in general are essential to the world in commercials and are treated fragilely. The actors and actresses show us some words and gestures to let our family and friends know we care.

Commercials are, at least at this juncture, an inevitable part of our television environment. It is time to acknowledge that they set norms by which our communicative behavior may be given meaning, and

they may be establishing role models we follow. In the very vital area of interpersonal communication, especially in conveying love, it is somehow unsettling to realize that how we express caring may be influenced by Proctor and Gamble or General Mills. But that is exactly what is happening. We would do well to--at the very least--become aware and begin the process of systematically monitoring what television commercials are teaching us to do to indicate our affection when we reach out to touch someone.

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